

Observations on British Butterflies in 1976 Part I

By Dr. C. J. LUCKENS

It is a great pleasure to find something of entomological worth in the depths of winter, and for me this is fulfilled by a successful search for Hairstreak ova. One such expedition was undertaken to Alice Holt Forest a few days after the New Year, and while my two older sons indulged in cycle speed trials up and down the rides I was able to concentrate on the oak twigs in relative peace. A dozen ova of *Thecla quercus* L. found in an hour of searching, made the trip worthwhile. This batch produced typical butterflies in mid-June, but among some others collected from West Sussex in December 1975 (which emerged around the same time) was a female specimen with small orange patches at the end of the cell—ab. *flavimaculatus* Lienard (= *bellus* Gerh.).

February slid into March and on the first of the month my wife saw a male *Gonopteryx rhamni* L. near our house in Southampton. The following day we had something of an ornithological event. A pair of Siskins which were regular attenders at our garden peanut bar were joined by a male Brambling in what looked like full breeding plumage—a lovely sight in the bright March sunlight.

I waited until nearly the end of the month to see my first butterfly and this was *Aglais urticae* L. on the south vallum of Hod Hill on March 26th. Larvae of *Euphydryas aurinia* Rott. were taking the sun here and there, but in very small numbers. I suspect the colony is at a low ebb at present and in view of the paucity of scabious in the Dorset Naturalists' Trust Reserve it seems hardly surprising.

Two days later all the common hibernators were flying freely. We saw *rhamni*, *urticae* and *Inachis io* L. in our garden and during a visit to Bentley Woods during the afternoon good numbers of *Polygona c-album* L. were noted.

A holiday in the third week of April enabled me to spend some time in an area of West Sussex where *Nymphalis polychloros* L. has turned up from time to time over the last five years. Several visits failed to produce this rarity but it was a great pleasure just walking around in these woods in the invigorating Spring sun. On one such walk a preoccupied stoat hirpled down the ride to within a few yards of me before suddenly scampering off into the undergrowth.

On April 21st I joined Mr. R. F. Bretherton in a Surrey wood where we released well over 150 half-grown *aurinia* larvae in a ride thickly carpeted with scabious. These larvae, which I have bred in captivity since 1973, are from a North Surrey colony which is almost certainly extinct in the wild. During the afternoon *Anthocharis cardamines* L. was seen alongside the roads around Bramley.

Cold winds prevailed for several days but abated on April

26th when cuckoos were calling in a western enclosure of the New Forest and several male *Celestrina argiolus* L. flitted around a grove of sombre hollies. Later on in the first week in May this delicate little butterfly became more numerous but never approached the abundance of the *argiolus* year of 1970.

May 7th was a superb day—warm and continuously sunny—and at Whiteparish Common the first *Boloria euphrosyne* L. were skimming over the bugle flowers. A week later they were much commoner near Winchester, and the two skippers *Erynnis tages* L. and *Pyrgus malvae* L., especially the latter, were in excellent numbers. A few fresh *Hamearis lucina* L., *Callophrys rubi* L. and *Pararge megera* L. made an appearance in this same coppiced wood.

Heavy showers on May 15th made beating and searching blackthorns in a Bucks. locality rather heavy going. However, several larvae of *Strymonidia pruni* L. were obtained from this thickety wood where nightingale song resounded.

The wych elms of Badbury Rings, the following weekend, produced no larvae of *Strymonidia w-album* Knoch. but *P. malvae* and *Polyommatus icarus* Rott. were in evidence and there were *cardamines* ova on nearly all the stands of hedge mustard along the road verges. Later in the morning a breathless run to the top of Hod Hill revealed my appalling unfitness but also the rewarding sight of the first *aurinia* males already out on the south vallum and a good showing of *Aricia agestis* D. & S. and *C. rubi*, mainly on the steep western slope of this ancient hill fort.

Cupido minimus L. was common on Portsdown on May 28th and flower heads of kidney vetch were studded with the tiny pale turquoise ova of this butterfly. Quite a cloud of males arose from one patch of long grass as I walked by.

The next day the children came with me to the Winchester downs where a good variety of butterfly species were on the wing. In particular, *P. icarus* and *A. agestis* were out in notable force and a few examples of *C. minimus* and to my delight, *Lysandra bellargus* Rott. were also seen. I started to examine these blues for varieties but nothing of note turned up in spite of the excellent numbers flying. Just before leaving I met Mr. L. Young who had worked this hillside for several hours with similar results.

Our belated decision to visit the Isle of Wight on June 2nd resulted in a hurried car journey from Southampton in order to catch the Lymington ferry. In accordance with a well known "law" everything conspired to hold us up—motorists considered it a point of honour to prevent me overtaking them, level crossing gates closed in our faces and all traffic lights were red. However, my eldest son and I pounded down the long companionway to the ferry just as the gang-plank was being lifted. After that all went smoothly and we arrived at the south coast of the island to find *Melitea cinxia* L. in profusion. There was even one on the roadside at the bus

stop. Several other butterfly species were seen in the same locality, including *C. minimus*, *A. agestis*, *P. icarus*, *P. megera*, *E. tages* and the first *Ochlodes venata* Br. & Grey.

On June 3rd, I started operations at Portsdown where *C. minimus* was common and still quite fresh in the main and accompanied by *Coenonympha pamphilus* L., a few *P. icarus* and the first *Maniola jurtina* L. A wood near Fareham was visited in the afternoon. I knew one part of this wood well but decided to explore a different sector and was gratified to find a strong colony of *Boloria selene* D. & S. and a single worn female *aurinia*. This locality used to be renowned for the latter butterfly but it declined disastrously in the mid-60's and a lone male I saw in 1973 in another area of the wood was the first after a gap of several years. Hopefully the Marsh Fritillary is making a comeback here.

Two days later my wife, our youngest son and I set off for East Cornwall. We had continuous trouble with the car and at Dorchester found we had left behind some essential items of luggage and had to retrace our steps. We finally arrived at our destination at 10.30 that evening. June 6th was dull and grey and we did nothing but sit around recovering from our traumatic journey of the previous day.

By the next morning the fine weather had returned and we lost no time in getting to a haunt of *Mellicta athalia* Rott. situated in a beautiful secluded Cornish valley. As we parked the car beside the road, *athalia* fluttering over the bonnet seemed a good omen and we found the butterfly in plenty all along the valley. Females were just emerging and the males still in excellent condition, but variation was virtually non-existent. Flying in company with *athalia* were numerous *selene* and one or two *euphrosyne* and *aurinia*; single examples of *cardamines*, *tages* and *malvae* were also noted in this rich area. I was pleased to renew acquaintance with Captain Peter Gainsford whom I met by chance.

After driving through superb countryside to the edge of Dartmoor on June 8th, I set off on the longish walk to another *athalia* site which I had last visited in 1972. Disappointment awaited me, for the former flourishing colony was sadly reduced in numbers—about six males and three females were seen in the prime site, but a short distance away the butterfly seemed to have spread thinly over quite a wide area. I visited the "athalia valley" later on that day and again three days later but could find nothing more than two underside vars. One of these deposited a large batch of ova and I am hopeful of something impressive in the F2 generation.

Unsettled weather prevailed for a few days around mid-June and then the torrid weather started in earnest. Many of my captive stock of *Apatura iris* L. were out well before the end of the month and on the last day of June my wife and I visited the woods south of Salisbury to look for this fine insect. Within minutes of our entering the wood, two *iris* were seen settling on a patch of slightly damp ground and *Limenitis*

camilla L. and *Argynnis paphia* L. were out in profusion. The intense heat caused problems with our car again and while we waited for it to cool off in the shade, *iris* males flashed by at regular intervals. A large female floated down to the dusty track and walked around insinuating her proboscis under small pebbles in a search for moisture. After a while she flew on to a low bush in the shade and sat with outspread wings. She was still there when we were finally able to restart the car five minutes later.

Back in Southampton that afternoon, while we were being plied with much-needed drinks on a neighbour's lawn, a *T. quercus* consented to join the gathering. We have many oak trees in our area of Southampton, but though I have regularly scanned them for this butterfly I have never seen one in the city before.

TRESHNISH ISLES. — The Treshnish Isles are a group of eight terraced tertiary basalt islands with numerous small rocks situated approximately four miles off the north-west corner of Mull. The basalt is weathered into terraces giving the islands their characteristic outlines.

Lunga, the largest island, is 170 acres in area, a mile and a quarter long by 500 yards wide at the extremes, with a highest point of 337 feet at the northern end. The island is generally a grassy plateau with raised areas of basalt surrounded by sheer cliffs and a number of steep gullies with vegetated slopes and boulder scree.

Since 1970 four visits have been made to Lunga by a small party, mainly to ring the nesting seabirds. All the visits have been in June and the party have also recorded other wildlife seen. I have extracted the entomological portion of these notes. It is a privately owned island and special permission was obtained by the ringing group. It must be stressed that visitors are not allowed during the breeding season when great damage or disturbance could be inflicted on the seabird colonies.

Two species of butterfly were recorded — a Painted Lady (*Cynthia cardui* L.) and a few Common Blues (*Polyommatus icarus* Rott.). In addition the following insects, etc., were noted: Yellow dung-fly (*Scatophaga stercoraria*), Snipe-fly (*Rhagio scolopacea*), Caddis fly (*Leptocerus aterrimus*), the beetles *Ocypus olens*, *Dascillus cervinus* and *Pterostichus melanarius* and the spider (*Aranea diadema*). Click Beetle, Woodlouse, Earwig, Green aphid, Bumblebee and Harvestman sp. were also seen but not specifically identified. Red mites were common on the rocks.

My thanks are due to Geoff Ward who prepared the original report and to Geoff Cope for the loan of his copy and additional information. — G. SUMMERS, 23 West Close, Stafford, ST16 3TG.